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Gur Genc

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Abstract

It was on the evening of 22nd January, two days after Taner Baybars had died, that I received the news of his death by phone. I had been waiting for it. But, then again, I did not expect it so soon. He was 73 years old. He was a poet who had closed the 'gap' between his life and his art. At our last meeting, although he did not openly speak of it, he had known that he was dying; it had been obvious from his words and his preparations. Still, the news of a death is such that it catches you off-guard every time. Pushing you to hold on tightly to your memories, to write whatever memories you have of that person, to protect and preserve them. Maybe, this friend's death brings you once again face to face with your own mortality; his death gives meaning to your own life.

GÜR GENÇ

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It was early in October 2009; I had been invited to France for a poetry event within the scope of the Biennale. It was a three-day programme. To come to France after so many years, and not visit Taner Baybars was unthinkable. I delayed my return for another day. We were to meet again after twelve years; I was excited.

I boarded a train at the Gare-de-Lyon, and after a long journey (the return was to be longer and much more surreal) I arrived in Narbonne.

Paris had been rainy, Narbonne was bright and sunny.

We met at the station. He was hatless; he did not wear glasses; he did not carry a walking-stick. Despite the fact that he moved very slowly and was limping, he looked well. When I told him this, he said: ‘I’m like a pear; I rot from the inside’.

From what he told me, it seems that things had started to go wrong after the small ‘pruning’ operation on his heart two years ago. His stomach was weak; he could no longer drink the red wine he loved so much. Before he could drink two litres a day. ‘It’s all my fault’, he said, ‘I shouldn’t have drunk all that wine on an empty stomach’. The problem with his hip that made walking difficult could be cancer. The diagnosis had not been made yet, he was still undergoing examinations and tests. He had trouble with his right eye too, therefore he could not read much, nor could he drive at night. He mentioned that his father had gone

completely blind before he died (adding that although his father was dead, he had still not forgiven him).

I didn't dwell on the fact that he hadn't forgiven his father, he was much more soft-spoken, sensitive and humorous than I had remembered him. At the same time, I knew from working with him that he was extremely tidy, fastidious to a degree of obstinacy and took offence at the smallest thing.

As we were conversing, sometimes in Turkish and sometimes in English, I asked him one after the other all the questions I had saved up over the years. We had coffee in a cafe near the station. Then we walked to a park a few blocks away. Due to his hip problem he was walking extremely slowly. We stopped now and then to rest.

In the park, where the noise of the children playing close by drowned out the songs of the birds, we continued to speak of poetry, short stories, novels, of Cyprus, Britain, France, mutual friends, his favourite music (Baroque) and our own lives.

The inevitable subject came up: since leaving Cyprus he had never returned. 'When I left, Cyprus had been one, now it is divided. I do not wish to come and see it like that', he said. He added that he also had a great fear of flying, and said for this reason alone, he would never attempt such a journey. Besides, in our last interview, he had said: 'I should have returned to Cyprus earlier, however the political situation had made this impossible, and when I was ready to return, it was too late'. In my opinion, the reason he never returned to Cyprus was more sentimental than political.

He told me that some relatives had taken possession of the house left to him by his parents, that they had cheated him (another clue as to why he never wanted to return to Cyprus). It was not the house he was thinking about, but some notebooks, books and objects left in the house.

He told me about brothel adventures in Nicosia dating back to the '50s, that he had shared with his good friends Ayhan Hikmet and Muzaffer Gürkan — both later killed by the TMT.

We had our dinner in a Kurdish restaurant where Taner was a regular patron, where he was shown special attention. We spoke about the Kurdish issue, about how Turkish cinema had started to touch upon that issue.

Over dinner, I asked questions about the place where he now lived, Saint Chinian. He said he regretted having moved from Charente. Saint Chinian was too hot in the summer months. Too far from Paris. No one came to visit him, not even his daughter. Though his house was fairly large, he was not happy with it. A blacksmith had opened next door. He could not stand the racket he was making. He said he wanted to sell the house and return to Charente.

He thought that I would be staying for a few days. He had prepared a room. When we got home, he would have cooked some *kolokas* for me, that he kept in the deep freeze for special occasions.

I asked about his last lover, Miu, a Chinese woman and the subject of his book, *Chrononauts*. She had kidnapped her child who had been living with her ex-husband and gone to China. She could not come back.

He complained about the hardships of living alone, especially now that he was not well. I asked him a very personal question, one that I normally would not have dared. I asked if he ever regretted leaving his wife; he replied ‘never, I have never regretted it even for a moment’.

Because he could not drive in the dark, he had to return home before nightfall, and his house was forty-five minutes away. As he was leaving, he gave me an oil painting (*le bois l’air le feu*) from his last exhibition and some old, valuable books, some of which were dedicated to him personally.

I accompanied him to his car. A bag full of glasses and maps on the back seat caught my eye. I promised to visit him again next year, in the summer, with my family; and not knowing it was our last meeting, we said goodbye.

After his departure, I had another two hours until my train. I went straight into the ‘Bodege’, a bar next door to the train station. I ordered myself a glass of red wine and started reading his poetry collection, *The Fox and The Nightjar*, once again.

(Translated by Oya Akin)